

Steve Jobs and the Founder's Pain

After reading the new biography *Steve Jobs*, the person I most identify with is Jony Ive. Ive and Jobs became close friends and collaborators, but Ive, “so instinctively nice,” found himself puzzled about how his good friend could be so mean:

He's a very, very sensitive guy. That's one of the things that makes his antisocial behavior, his rudeness, so unconscionable. I can understand why people who are thick-skinned and unfeeling can be rude, but not sensitive people. [...And] because of how very sensitive he is, he knows exactly how to efficiently and effectively hurt someone. And he does do that. (462)

Steve's fits are legendary. “He would shout at a meeting, ‘You asshole, you never do anything right,’” recalls his director of finance, Debi Coleman. “It was like an hourly occurrence.” (124) “This is shit!” he yelled after seeing the first draft of the “Here's to the crazy ones” ad. “It's advertising agency shit and I hate it.” (329)

Something was either “the best thing ever,” or it was shitty, brain-dead, inedible. ...Any perceived flaw could set off a rant. The finish on a piece of metal, the curve on the head of a screw, the shade of blue on a box, the intuitiveness of a navigation screen—he would declare them to “completely suck” until that moment when he suddenly pronounced them “absolutely perfect.” (561)

One way of reading this is that Steve Jobs is just a sociopath, someone who knows exactly where people's weaknesses are and plays on them masterfully until they do exactly, precisely what he wants, without little concern about human consequences.

But there's another, more sympathetic reading. I think Jobs really did feel this way. He had such an intense aesthetic sense that even something as minor as the curve on the head of the screw could cause him enormous pain. And, like anyone in pain, he responded by lashing out at the people around him. There are some people who, when they're insulted, can't resist punching the person who insulted them. Steve wasn't much for physical violence, but when something looked off to him, he couldn't help screaming.

I sympathize because I can see this in myself. Something that's perfect just feels much, much better than something that's almost right. When I'm doing something myself, I can just sit there and work at it until it's *exactly* right. It's embarrassing to launch a product with a bug in it! It physically hurts when I realize that's what I've done. But as projects and companies grow, there are more and more people in between me and those tiny details. And then I face a choice: do I keep complaining until something's perfect or do I just let go and consider it somebody else's problem?

Steve never let go. He continued to feel that founder's pain about everything in his life. When it was his project, he'd make people stay late until they got it right. When it was his company, he'd go right to the person responsible, even if they were 5 levels down in the org chart, and make them fix it. (“After looking at a bunch of screenshots, Jobs jumped up, grabbed a marker, and drew a simple rectangle on a whiteboard. ‘Here's the new application,’ he said. ‘It's got one window. You drag your video into the window. Then you click the button that says “Burn.” That's it.’” (382))

In fact, it didn't matter whose company it was. He once sent his fresh-squeezed juice back to the kitchen three times in a row until they got it right (527); when his cable box was frustrating him, he called the CEO of Comcast. (“I thought he was calling to say something nice about it,” the CEO recalled. “Instead, he told me ‘It sucks.’” (489))

And that's why I like Jony Ive. He too clearly feels that pain (he once insisted they hold up an entire product launch because he didn't like the polish on the screws) but he doesn't lash out at people about it. Instead, he sits down with the people involved and works to fix the problem until they get it just right.

Ask Jobs about his viciousness and he insisted it was all for the best: “I've learned over the years that when you have really good people you don't have to baby them...A-plus players like to work together, and they don't like it if you tolerate B work. Ask any member of that Mac team. They will tell you it was worth the pain.” Even Debi Coleman agreed: “I consider myself the absolute luckiest person in the world to have worked with him.”

But does it require so much pain? My hope is that I can be just as exacting, demand work just as good, without emotionally destroying people in the process. I want to be a perfectionist *and* a nice guy. I want to be Jony Ive. I hope it works — for my sake, and Apple's.

Thanks to Ben Wikler for suggesting this post.

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November 3, 2011